DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 101 252 CG 009 522

AUTHOR Hill, Michael K.; Kahn, Arnold
TITLE Physical Attractiveness and Proximity in the Attribution of Success.
PUB DATE May 74
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Midwestern Psychological Association (Chicago, Illinois, May 1974)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 HC-$1.58 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS *Affective Behavior; Behavior Patterns; *Distance; *Females; *Physical Characteristics; Research Projects; Speeches; *Success Factors; Task Performance

ABSTRACT

This study assessed attributions made to an attractive or unattractive person who took either a proximal or distal seating position following task performance. Greater attributions of success were made to an attractive person, regardless of the proximity, which suggests pervasive influence of physical attractiveness on attributions in behavioral situations. (Author)

ED101252

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Physical Attractiveness and Proximity in the Attribution of Success

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

Michael K. Hill and Arnold Kahn
Iowa State University

The experimental analysis of the attribution process has recently attempted to specify the conditions under which different variables become salient to the perceiver. This study manipulated two salient variables, physical attractiveness and proximity, both of which are clearly immediately obvious to an observer. While previous research has established that each of these variables yields predictable attributions in isolation, no previous study has looked at both variables simultaneously in an actual behavioral context.

As early as 1921, Perrin found that the physical characteristics of a given individual contribute significantly to differential responses made to that person. A host of other investigators (Hollingworth, H. L., 1922; Hollingworth, L.S., 1935; Holmes and Hatch, 1938; Mohr, 1932; Rokeach, 1943) have correlated physical attractiveness with other variables. All concur in the conclusion that level of physical appeal exerts a strong influence on the qualities attributed to a person.

However, only recently have investigators turned their attention to experimental analyses of the effects of physical

CG 009 522

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

attractiveness. Miller (1970a) had subjects of both sexes record their impressions of photographed persons on the Adjective Preference Scale (Jackson & Minton, 1963). He found significant effects on 15 of the 17 dimensions for both male and female judges. Specifically, Miller consistently found the unattractive person consigned to the negative or undesirable portion of the scale, while the highly attractive person was perceived positively. In a later study, Miller (1970b) was able to show that physically attractive persons were likely to be seen as masters of their own fate, as people who behave from their own volition; whereas unattractive persons were likely to be seen as influenced by others or the enviornment.

On the basis of these data, Berscheid and Walster (1974) conclude that the perception of a stimulus person's level of physical appeal should affect the kinds of inferences people make about the motivation underlying the person's acts. This hypothesis was addressed by both Dion, Berscheid, and Walster (1972) and Landy and Sigall (1974). The results of the Dion et al. study show that for both sex judges, attractive individuals were judged to be more socially desirable than unattractive persons. Landy and Sigall (1974) had male subjects rate essays written by either a physically attractive or unattractive female. Their results show that the greater the level of the writer's physical appeal, the higher the rating of the essay, thus confirming the What-Is-Beautiful-Is-Good

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

thesis in a person perception framework. However, to date no study has tested the efficiency of the Beauty-Is-Good thesis by asking subjects to make behavioral predictions in face-to-face interaction.

Physical attractiveness is an immediately obvious variable; it is present from the beginning of any face-to-face encounter. Proximity of a person to a given stimulus object is also an immediately obvious event. That proximity does indeed affect attributions made about the stimulus person has been prevsiously demonstrated in two seperate contexts. Argyle and Dean (1965) found that a large distance between two individuals implied a negative affect. Conversly, a small distance should imply a positive affect. Differential distances between a person and a stimulus object should likewise imply affect differences. Little, Conley, and Kahn (1973) did find that low status subjects tended to sit further from an "art object" than subjects given higher status. This lends credence to the assumption that persons experiencing prior success in a given context will tend to approach that situation, while persons experiencing prior non-success will tend to avoid that situation. This line of reasoning becomes more valid if one assumes that previous success is reinforceing and previous non-success if non-reinforceing. The relevant research on proximics lends credence to this line of reasoning (Hall, 1959; 1969; Mehrabian, 1972; Sommor, 1969). In fact, Mehrabian (1972) found that subjects interpreted close proximity to a

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

given situation as showing a positive attitude toward that situation. From this, he concluded that adults may infer attitude variations from contrasts in immediacy. Thus, when viewing a person in a proximal relationship with a given situation, we would tend to infer preference for and success in that situation. When viewing a person in a distal relationship with a given situation we would infer a non-preference for and non-success in that situation.

In this experiment both physical attractiveness of a confederate, and her proximity to an ability related stimulus object were independently manipulated in a face-to-face behavioral setting. The specific hypotheses tested were:

1. Subjects will preceive the stimulus person as being more successful when she was highly physically attractive than when she was highly physically unattractive.
2. The stimulus person will be attributed greater success when sitting closest to an ability related stimulus object (maximally proximal) then when sitting far away from the object (maximally distal).
3. Attractiveness of the stimulus person and proximity to the object will interact such that those high in physical appeal and maximally proximal will be perceived as the most successful, and those low in attractiveness and maximally distal as the least successful.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Method

Subjects

Subjects were 72 female students from the Introductory Psychology classess at Iowa State University. All participants received class credit for their participation.

Procedure

Subjects were run in groups of three with a female confederate planted in the group. The confederate was trained to participate as the fourth member of an "aesthetic appreciation" group. The confederate was made to appear either physically attractive (nicely dressed, hair attractively made-up, and make-up tastefully applied) or physically unattractive (sloppily dressed, hair uncombed, excessive make-up carelessly applied, and a pillow as used to obtain a "tummy" effect). The three subjects and confederate were ushered into the experimental room as a group.

After completion of biographical data sheets, subjects were told that the experiment was concerned with assessing aesthetic appreciation among the general population. The experiment consisted of two parts, music appreciation and art appreciation. The music appreciation portion consisted of a tape recording of computer generated random noises. After the tape was played, subjects completed questionnaires concerning their reactions to the music. Each group was told that their judgements were being compared to the judgements

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

made by graduate students in art and music. After completion of these music ratings, the group was then randomly assigned to one of three proximity conditions (Near/Far/No Proximity Information) within each attractiveness condition.

Near Condition In this condition, the experimenter explained that the second portion of the experiment (art appreciation) was held in an ajoining room and they could now go there. As the subjects left the room, the confederate delayed herself in order to arrive last in the second room. A covered "art object" was situated in the middle of the room, with three chairs placed in a semi-circle around the object (average distance= one foot). The subjects seated themselves in these chairs. The confederate, who was late, was forced to bring a chair from the side of the room which she placed as close to the art object as she could (approx. distance= 4 in.), clearly closer than the naive subject. After the confederate was seated, the experimenter gave the rational for the interpersonal evaluations. After completion of the evaluation forms, the group was informed that the experiment was over and all subjects were debriefed.

Far Condition This condition duplicated the Near condition except that the confederate placed herself as far removed from the art object as the room allowed (approx. distance= 3½ ft.), clearly more distant than the naive subject. All instructions were the same as in the near condition.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

No Proximity Information Condition In this condition, the experimenter explained that he wanted the interpersonal evaluations before going on to the art appreciation portion. Thus, these subjects never left the first room. All further instructions were identical to both previous groups.

Interpersonal Evaluations

Each subject was asked to make interpersonal evaluations on each of the other three subjects in the group. This was explained by reference to the common sense notion that aesthetic appreciation and social perception were highly related and thus, to look at one, we need to look at the other.

Subjects were given a number, with the confederate always receiving number one. All subjects were given identical forms to complete.

Measures were taken from the interpersonal evaluations the subjects made on the confederate only. The first four scales were seven-point Likert scales anchored on the extremes. These questions were:

1. How well do you believe this person performed on the first task?
2. How well do you believe this person will perform on the next task?
3. How much would you like to work on a similar task with this person?

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

4. How much would you like to work on a dissimilar task with this person?

Values assigned were from -3 to +3 with a zero midpoint; the more positive the score the higher the evaluation. Each scale was analyzed seperately. The fifth scale was a seven-point scale designed to serve as the manipulation check. The scale asked:

5. In relation to others you know, how attractive do you find this person?

Values assigned were from -3 (Last 5% in attractiveness on Campus) to +3 (Top 5% in attractiveness on Campus).

Results

Manipulation Check

To analyze the manipulation check, all proximity conditions were collasped within each attractiveness condition. Results show that there was a significant difference on perceived attractiveness ($F_{att.}$ (1,66)= 60.462, $p < .0001$) with the attractive confederate seen as reliably more attractive than the unattractive confederate. These data can be seen in Table 1.

Dependent Measure

Table 1 also presents the means and tests of significance for the four dependent measures. As can be seen from the table, in no case does the proximity manipulation or the inter-

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

action term approach significance, although the means are in the predicted direction. The attractiveness manipulation, however, is significant in all conditions (p minimum $< .04$) with all means in the predicted direction.

Discussion

Prior to this experiment, the Beauty-Is-Good stereotype has been investigated only in a person perception framework. In other words, subjects were asked to make attributions about hypothetical others. This experiment, on the other hand, asked subjects to make specific attributions to a real person in a behavioral setting. The fact that attributions under these circumstances are in line with the Beauty-Is-Good hypothesis lends considerabel support to Dion, Berscheid, and Walster's (1972) contention that we manifest stereotypical attitudes in our attributions.

The total absence of effects due to proximity is interesting. At no time was the main effect for proximity or the interaction significant, although the means are in the appropriate direction. There are several possible explanations for this finding. One lies in the constraints imposed by the size of the room used in the present study. It may well be that manipulations of proximity were simply not observable or salient to the subject. Unfortunately, there is no possibility of either accepting or rejecting this hypothesis, since percpetions of closeness

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

would have been difficult to plausibly assess. A second explanation lies in a consideration of the power of the Beauty-Is-Good thesis. Quite simply, the manipulation of physical attractiveness may have been strong enough to totally obscure the proximity effect. If this explanation were accurate, considerable support could be mustered for the Beauty-Is-Good thesis. Finally, it may be argued that, unlike physical attractiveness, proximity effects have no baselines from which the subject can make comparasions. In other words, we may know very well what is attractive or unattractive, and based on this information, attribute differential characteristics. However, we may not know what is near or far in a given situation. Thus, proximity, while perceived, could not have been interpreted by the subject.

This study and others have adequately demonstrated that physical attractiveness is a variable of tremendious impact. The absolute value our culture places upon physical appeal is clearly evident in beauty contests, advertizing, and cosmetology. In this culture, beauty is equated with goodness, success, and happiness. In short, attractive people are viewed as doing good things.

One of the more interesting aspects of this study is the fact that it investigated the interaction of two stereotypes in a person perception paradigm. Historically, the study of attribution has proceeded from a unideterminent framework. However, as Brown (1965) has argued, the perceiver is processing

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

a myriad of information at any one time. Thus, in order to equate the labratory with the real world, multi-determinent attribution paradigms should be designed to assess possible interaction effects.

Table 1

Mean Scores for Attractiveness and Proximity Conditions

Condition	Question Number				
Proximity	1	2	3	4	5
Near	1.375	1.458	.750	.1667	.4167
Far	1.000	1.042	.000	.0833	.792
No Information	.7917	.750	.083	.542	.625
F	1.0531	1.437	1.898	.6362	.7522
p	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Physical Attractiveness					
Attractive	1.472	1.444	.7778	.7222	1.583
Unattractive	.6389	.722	.222	.1944	-0.361
F	6.282	4.437	8.426	6.726	60.426
p	.014	.04	.005	.01	.0001

Questions

1. How well do you believe this person performed on the first task? Not well at all _____ Very well

2. How well do you believe this person will perform on the next task? Not well at all _____ Very well

3. How much would you like to work on a similar task with this person? Not at all _____ Very much

4. How much would you like to work on a dissimilar task with this person? Not at all _____ Very much

5. In relation to others you know, how attractive do you find this person? Last 5% on Campus _____ Top 5% on Campus

REFERENCES

Argyle, M., and Dean, J. Eye-contact, distance, and affiliation. Sociometry, 1965, 28, 289-304.

Berscheid, E., and Walster, E. Physical Attractiveness. For Berkowitz, L. (Ed.), Advances in Experimental Social Psychology, New York: Academic Press, 1974.

Brown, R. Social Psychology. New York: The Free Press, 1965.

Dion, K. K. Physical attractiveness and evaluation of children's transgressions. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 1972, 24, 207-213.

Dion, K., Berscheid, E., and Walster, E. What Is Beautiful Is Good. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 1972, 24, 285-290.

Hall E. T. The Silent Language. New York: Fawcett World Library, 1959.

Hall E. T. The Hidden Dimension. New York: Anchor Books, 1969.

Hollingworth, H. L. Judging Human Character. In Human Character in Photographs. New York: Appleton, 1922.

Hollingworth, L. S. The comparative beauty of the faces of highly intelligent adolescents. Journal of Genetic Psychology, 1935, 47, 268-281.

Holmes, S. J. and Hatch, C. E. Personal appearance as related to scholastic records and marriage selection in college women. Human Biology, 1938, 10, 65-76.

Jackson, D. N. and Minton, H. L. A forced-choice Adjective Preference Scale for Personality assessment. Psychological

Reports, 1963, 12, 515-520.

Jones, E. E. and Goethals, G. R. Order Effects in Impression Formation: Attribution Context and the Nature of the Entity. New York: General Learning Press, 1971.

Landy, D. and Sigall, H. Beauty is Talent: Task evaluation as a function of performers physical attractiveness. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 1974, 29, 299-304.

Little, S., Conley, S., and Kahn, A. Effects of Relative Status on spacing in a group. Paper presented at the Midwestern Psychological Association convention, Chicago, 1973.

Mehrabian, A. Nonverbal Communication. Chicago; Aldine-Atherton, Inc., 1972.

Miller, A. G. Role of physical attractiveness in impression formation. Psychonomic Science, 1970, 19, 241-243.

Miller, A. G. Social perception of Internal-External control. Perceptual and Motor Skills, 1970, 30, 103-109.

Mohr, A. M. Beauty as related to intelligence and scholarship. Psychological Bulletin, 1932, 29, 564-565.

Perrin, F. A. C. Physical Attractiveness and Repulsiveness. Journal of Experimental Psychology, 1921, 4, 203-217.

Rokeach, M. Studies in Beauty: I. The relationship between beauty in women, dominance, and security. Journal of Social Psychology, 1943, 17, 181-189.

Sommer, R. Personal Space. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1969.